

Newcastle University ePrints

Castro JE. [Water fountains in Buenos Aires, Argentina](#). In: Hynynen AJ; Juuti PS; Katko TS, ed. *Water Fountains in the Worldscape*. Finland: International Water History Association and KehräMedia, 2012, pp.66-71.

Copyright:

The definitive version of this article, published by International Water History Association and KehräMedia, 2012, is available at:

<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-98151-8-3>

Always use the definitive version when citing.

Further information on publisher website: <http://www.iwha.net/>

Date deposited: 7th August 2014

Version of file: Published



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](#)

ePrints – Newcastle University ePrints

<http://eprint.ncl.ac.uk>

WATER FOUNTAINS OF BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

José Esteban Castro

INTRODUCTION

The city of Buenos Aires, federal capital of Argentina, has a population of around 2.8 million people, which rises to around 12 million when we take into account the whole metropolitan area of the Great Buenos Aires (INDEC, 2008). The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area is the third largest urban agglomeration in Latin America after Mexico and Sao Paulo, and concentrates around one third of the country's population.

Buenos Aires is a city endowed with numerous public fountains that form an important part of the city's history. In this brief synthesis I have decided to focus on just four examples, which illustrate a wide range of aspects connected with the function of fountains in the cityscape. It necessarily covers a very limited sample given that, according to a recent survey by the local government, there exist 69 public fountains in the Argentinean capital (Government of the City of Buenos Aires, 2008), some of which date from the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century urban development of Buenos Aires was greatly influenced by the main trends emerging from Europe, especially the sanitary movement and the radical policies epitomized by Baron Haussmann's urban reforms in Paris during the 1850s and 1860s. Also important was the impact of the influx of European immigration, which included urban designers and artists often invited by the country's authorities (Pena and Shaw, 1992). The very



close affinity with Western European culture boasted by the landowning oligarchic class that governed the country at the time was a crucial driving factor in the design of public urban spaces during this period. In particular, the consolidation of Buenos Aires as the country's capital in 1880 was marked by large-scale urban reforms aimed at creating ample public spaces following the examples of Paris and Barcelona, and European architects, engineers, and artists played a fundamental role in this process. However, this strive to Europeanize the urban space was not the preserve of the Argentinean elites but rather a characteristic of the rising Latin American bourgeoisies of the time, who sought to assert themselves in the international scene by erasing the signs of the colonial past under Spanish and Portuguese domination and recasting their countries' capital cities along the lines of Haussmann's Paris (Romero, 1976). The first three fountains considered here are examples of this process.

THE PLAZA DE MAYO FOUNTAINS

The Plaza de Mayo [May Square] is at the heart of the city's history. Originally named Plaza Mayor [High Square] by Juan de Garay, the Spanish officer in charge of the permanent foundation of the city in 1580, it has been the centre of political and social events ever since. In the early times it housed a market and was a meeting point for travellers and traders; but it was also the space for public punishment, for religious and military ceremonies as well as the celebration of festivities. The Plaza's current site is the result of urban reforms carried out in 1884, when two then-existing squares, the Plaza de la Victoria [Victory Square] and the Plaza del Fuerte [Fort Square], were merged to create the Plaza de Mayo.

In 1868 the Plaza de la Victoria had been adorned with two fountains commissioned by the government from the French art foundry Du Val D'Osne, a company that had already been providing the city with art works for several years and even had a local office and storehouse in Buenos Aires (Pena and Snyder, 1992: 231). In fact, Du Val D'Osne provided

numerous fountains for various cities in those days, including Valencia in Spain, Valparaíso in Chile, and several towns in France (Pena and Shaw, 1992: 208). These fountains had a mainly decorative purpose and were ornamented with classical figures of cast iron after the neoclassical tradition of Italian Renaissance sculptures. They remain among the most valued artistic monuments of the city. However, they were moved from the Plaza de Mayo and are currently located at the intersection of 9 de Julio Avenue and Córdoba Avenue. Fig. 1 shows one of the two fountains originally located at the Plaza de Mayo.

PALERMO'S PARKS AND FOUNTAINS

The French landscape architect Charles Thays (1849-1934) and the Belgian architect Jules Dormal (1846-1924), who completed the construction of the famous Colon Theatre in 1908, played a substantial role in the development of Buenos Aires' public amenities. In particular, they were responsible for the design of the Tres de Febrero Park [February the 3rd Park] in Palermo featuring three artificial lakes, which was largely based on Paris' Bois de Boulogne (Pena and Shaw, 1992: 207). Today Palermo continues to be one of the greener spaces in the city, with numerous parks, artificial water bodies and several fountains. These include the Fuente Riqueza Agropecuaria [Agricultural Wealth Fountain] donated by the German government in 1910 in commemoration of Argentina's first centenary as an independent republic (Fig. 2). The Fountain was designed by the German sculptor Gustav Adolf Bredow (1875-1953), who was a specialist in fountains and other public monuments. It is over 25 meters long and was built with Carrara marble, white stone and bronze (Haedo, 1978).

This account looks at a number of the functions played by fountains: a) to commemorate a historical event, the Argentinean independence from Spain in 1810; b) to symbolize the flourishing cultural and political ties between Germany and Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when Germany was actively competing with England and France

Fig. 1 One of the original Plaza de Mayo fountains (Photo: Esteban Castro, 2009).



Fig. 2 (left) *Fountain Riqueza Agropecuaria*, located in Plaza Alemania [Germany Square] in Palermo (Photo: Esteban Castro, 2009).

Fig. 3 Detail, *Fountain of the Nereids* or *Lola Mora's fountain*, located in Costanera Sur (Photo: Esteban Castro, 2009).



for political, economic and military influence in Latin America and had already become an important trading partner for Argentina and other Latin American countries; and c) to reflect the strong influence of the Argentinean landowning class, which dominated the country's economic and political scene. Agricultural production was the driving force behind Argentina's incorporation into the world market, which took place roughly between 1870 and 1914.

THE FOUNTAIN OF THE NEREIDS OR LOLA MORA'S FOUNTAIN

The third example chosen for this brief review is the work of the Argentinean sculptress, Dolores Mora de la Vega, popularly known as Lola Mora (1866-1936). She was a student of the Italian master Giulio Monteverde (1837-1917), who worked in Buenos Aires and produced a number of important public sculptures, especially in the imposing Recoleta Cemetery (Pena and Shaw, 1992: 209). In the late 1890s Lola Mora was awarded a government scholarship to follow a career in Rome, first with the artist Francesco Paolo Michetti (1851-1929), and later with Giulio Monteverde (Corsani, 2007: 170). After winning several prizes in Europe, the Argentinean government commissioned her in 1901 to design a fountain, which was eventually inaugurated in 1903 in the vicinity of the Plaza de Mayo. Lola Mora's fountain was carved in Carrara marble and is a sophisticated representation of the birth of Venus (Fig. 3 and III.0), which was very well received by virtue of its artistic quality, but also became the target of sustained criticism for political and moralistic reasons.

The history of Lola Mora's fountain casts light on the complex socio-political and cultural configurations characterizing Argentina on the eve of the twentieth century. The original plan envisaged the location of the fountain in the Plaza de Mayo, but this proved unfeasible for a number of reasons including controversies over the funding of the project by the government (Corsani, 2007) and, particularly, the opposition of the conservative members of the local elite who considered that the nudity and sensuality of Lola

Mora's sculpture made the fountain unacceptable for the city's main public square. As a consequence, the inauguration of the fountain originally planned for 1902 was delayed for about one year, and when it finally happened, the government decided to relocate it to a less conspicuous and controversial spot, two blocks away from the Plaza de Mayo. Even then, the controversies continued and the fountain was removed in 1918 and relocated to its current position to the south of the city centre, in the riverfront area known as Costanera Sur (Pena and Shaw, 1992: 209-210; Solá, 2003; Corsani, 2007).

A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FOUNTAIN

The three examples considered above belong to the period of Buenos Aires' emergence as a world city between the late 1860s and the start of the Great War in 1914. For much of the rest of the twentieth century, and particularly between 1955 and 1983, the country was subject to authoritarian rule by military dictatorships with very brief periods of democratically elected governments in between. Argentina has enjoyed an uninterrupted period of electoral democracy since 1983, and therefore it is highly appropriate that our fourth example is the Fuente-Monumento de Homenaje a la Democracia (Fountain Monument to Honor Democracy), designed by the Czech-Argentinean sculptor Gyula Kosice (Fig. 4).

The fountain was inaugurated in May 2000 and is located at the intersection of 9 de Julio Avenue and

Fig. 4 Fountain Monument to Honor Democracy (Nicolás Geller, August 2008).



Marcelo T. de Alvear Street. Gyula Kosice has dedicated much effort to developing what he calls hydraulic art, which includes sculptures where water is the essential element, and has also designed sketches for a futuristic Hydrosatial City. The monument is composed of two groups of columns of concrete emerging from a round fountain supporting a metallic sphere of polished stainless steel. According to the sculptor, it is the first monument in the world dedicated to democracy (Kosice, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

This review of the water fountains of Buenos Aires is brief due to space restrictions, which is why it leaves out, not only most of the city's fountains, but also much of their historical, artistic and socio-political significance. However, the four examples chosen offer insights into a wide array of elements connected with the role of public fountains in the Buenos Ai-

res cityscape since the late nineteenth century. The fountains considered here have served a combination of decorative and commemorative functions, while playing a clearly more limited role in serving any utilitarian purposes beyond the enhancement of public spaces for recreation and socialization activities. Also, these fountains embody the influence of the European traditions of the time, in a city where by the late 1880s about half of the population were immigrants, mostly of European origin. However, the examples also reflect the internal tensions within the governing elite caught between the influence of liberal European ideas and institutions and deeply held conservative social practices and traditions in a context of rapid social change, as patently illustrated in the case of Lola Mora's fountain. Finally, our last example embodies the long-term struggle for the country's democratization, and for the democratization of world politics at large. It is only fitting that water has been chosen to symbolize such a cherished human hope.



SOURCES

- Corsani, Patricia Viviana. 2007. Honores y renunciaciones. La escultora argentina Lola Mora y la fuente de los debates (Honours and renunciations. The Argentinean sculptress Lola Mora and the contested fountain). *Anais do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material*. São Paulo, Brazil. Vol.15, No.2, pp. 169-196 (available at: <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/anaism/v15n2/a17v15n2.pdf>).
- Government of the City of Buenos Aires. 2008. Green spaces – fountains (in Spanish) (<http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar> – accessed July 2008).
- Haedo, Oscar Félix. 1978. Las Fuentes Porteñas. Cuadernos de Buenos Aires. No. 51. Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires.
- INDEC – National Institute for Statistics and Census (2008), 'Population', Buenos Aires: INDEC (http://www.indec.mecon.ar/principal.asp?id_tema=2 – accessed September 2008).
- Kosice, Gyula. 2000. 'Homenaje a la democracia' (In honor of democracy). Interview by Federico Prack, *La Nación*, Buenos Aires 10 May 2000.
- Pena, Jose Maria, and Edward Shaw. 1992. Public sculpture. *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. Vol. 18, Argentine Theme Issue, pp. 207-221.
- Pena, Jose Maria, and Jon R. Snyder. 1992. "Art-Nouveau" stained glass and ironwork. *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. Vol. 18, Argentine Theme Issue, pp. 223-241.
- Romero, José Luis. 1976. *Latinoamérica: las Ciudades y las Ideas*. Siglo XXI, Mexico City.